

Interviewee: OW_01

Name: Helen J

Title / Role: Old Weather Member

Organisation: Old Weather

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Interviewer: Paula Goodale

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1 Q: So can you start perhaps by telling me a little bit about yourself, and in particular do you have
2 any kind of education, career, leisure interests that are relevant to Old Weather?

3 A: Only fairly peripherally. I mean I'm not scientific at all. I mean I'm actually a Franciscan Nun,
4 and from about two weeks ago also a priest. I used to be a librarian--

5 Q: Ah, that's interesting.

6 A: --in a life before that, so I suppose kind of information you know, is something that I do think is
7 important. You know, and the more information the better really. But certainly not scientific. I
8 mean really I discovered Old Weather through hearing something on Radio 4. Just purely by
9 chance happened to be in the car, had the radio on, heard something about it, I think probably
10 on the *PM Programme*, and thought oh I'll have a look at that, and got hooked quite rapidly
11 really.

12 Q: So you heard it on the radio.

13 A: Yeah.

14 Q: What happened then, did you go and like have a look and see what was happening? How did
15 you decide to get involved?

16 A: Yes, I mean I went had a look at the website, had a look at the tutorial for how you actually
17 transcribe the page, and tried it and it didn't seem too complicated. Although I think at that
18 point there were an awful lot of technical terms and jargon, and everything which didn't mean
19 much to me. Because I mean I've also got no particular experience of anything naval or to do
20 with ships or whatever, and obviously, you know, there's quite a lot of technical language. So
21 initially I think I was probably pretty slow, and it all took a long time kind of looking at it and
22 trying to work out what on earth is that. And even just things like the weather, the
23 abbreviations for the weather conditions and things, obviously, initially I didn't really know. So
24 you know...

25 Q: So what really attracted you to it? What made you think when you had a look this is really
26 what I want to get involved in, this is why I want to do it?

27 A: I think initially it was because of the whole thing to do with climate change. Because
28 obviously, I've got a concern for the planet, you know, and the way that we treat it and so on.
29 And so actually doing something that was in some way going to contribute to that kind of
30 research attracted me. That was definitely the initial thing, you know, I was thinking this is an
31 amazing source of information, you know, all these logs, but there's no way of getting at them
32 unless people get in there and do it because computers can't read the writing. Mind you quite
33 often we have trouble with the writing as well, but on the whole we manage slightly better than
34 the computers would. And so, yeah, it was that initially, you know, and that continues you
35 know, to be the sort of background interest I suppose. You know, and feeling that that is a
36 worthwhile thing to do, and it's contributing to the, you know, to a scientific project that I think
37 is important.

38 And then I think I got interested in the wider picture as it were, of life on board the ships, and
39 the whole thing of, you know, the naval history mostly of the First World War, about which I
40 knew nothing. You know, and so it kind of spread itself out into all the other topics as well.
41 But yes, initially it was definitely the, it was the climate stuff initially.

42 Q: Do you get involved in any other climate related activities?

43 A: No, this is really the one. I mean I occasionally, you know, I find the odd petition online and
44 that kind of stuff, but I don't think that really counts terribly much. And just sort of trying to live,
45 you know, in a reasonably simple way so that you know, I'm trying to do my bit I suppose in
46 that sense, but not really projects, no. No, no this is the one.

47 Q: So can you remember how long ago it was you got started?

48 A: I think it was late 2010, so it wasn't very long after the whole project had begun. It wasn't right
49 at the beginning, but it was, it was certainly--, in fact I was just looking back to see when my
50 first post on the forum was, and yes I think it was December 2010.

51 Q: Right. So you're pretty old hand by now.

52 A: Yes, oh yes positively, positively ancient, yes.

53 Q: Would you say that your level of activity has changed over that time?

54 A: It's fluctuated a bit. I mean I was back at college for a year from sort of September of last year
55 through to June of this year, and so I definitely did less at that point, you know I had to decide.
56 So I actually stopped transcribing and just carried on with editing some of the ships from the
57 first phase because I knew I couldn't really carry on with both. But then once I got finished
58 and had got a bit more time I have gone back to doing transcribing again. I felt a bit guilty not
59 transcribing I have to say 'cause it does feel like that's the sort of, the most important part of
60 the project. But also I think at that point phase three had not long started, and it was really
61 quite hard work because the American logs were very different to the Royal Navy ones, the
62 interface was having to change. The initial interface was really quite experimental, and it was

63 just very hard going. And so I think partly I thought I'll leave them for a while to get it all sorted
64 out, you know [laughs]. And when I came back it was much more together, and yeah.

65 Q: So how much time do you spend on it? Say in a typical week, or month?

66 A: Erm, I mean it does vary a bit. I probably spend, I probably spend an hour or two most days I
67 would guess.

68 Q: Goodness.

69 A: I mean it tends to be, it tends to be something I do in the evening when I'm listening to the
70 radio. It goes very well with Radio 4, all the music or whatever, you know, so I'll do that and I
71 can be doing something, you know, sort of productive at the same time. So it's basically a sort
72 of leisure time activity. It is very addictive though it has to be said.

73 Q: Is it?

74 A: [Laughs].

75 Q: What makes it addic--,

76 A: It should come with a health--,

77 Q: What makes it addictive?

78 A: I suppose the sense that there's always more to do. I mean certainly, I mean the ship that I'm
79 transcribing on at the moment is a very, very, very long set of logs. I think it started about
80 1922, and it goes on to 1935. I've just reached 1928. And so you know, there's always a
81 sense of if I'm ever going to get this finished I could really do with doing a bit more of this. I
82 think I've accepted it's just going to take a long time now. I mean certainly some of the Royal
83 Navy ones where, obviously, they were engaged in, you know, in wartime activities there was
84 always a sense of what might be just round the corner for them, and wanting to keep going, or
85 knowing that something important was coming up. Or wanting to see the end of a particular
86 story if you like, you know. So it wasn't so much to do with the weather, but actually you know,
87 things to do with particular people, or other ships, or that kind of thing. And I started thinking,
88 oh you know, I can't just leave it there, I need to know what happens [laughter].

89 Q: Oh it sounds like fun.

90 A: It is, oh yes, I mean it's our cunning plan to recruit you to it by the time we've finished our
91 interviews.

92 Q: Oh right.

93 A: One of the reasons why we volunteer, get new people signed up.

94 Q: Well, I mean I work in a library school so I'm actually going to be doing a erm, or hoping to do
95 a talk about this with some archive students next year.

96 A: Oh right, oh very good. Right, oh right.

97 Q: So yes, I'll give you a plug there. So can you tell--,

98 A: Yes absolutely.

99 Q: Can you tell me on a practical level what the transcribing activities involve?

100 A: Right well, it involves I mean the, the pages of the logbooks have all been scanned and put
101 online. And so you basically choose a ship, I mean ideally you find one you like and stick with
102 it 'cause you get to know the writing and so on. I think some people probably just dot around
103 more, but I've always gone for one or possibly two if one of them's been particularly awful in
104 terms of writing. And then basically bring it up on your screen, you bring up a transcribing box
105 for each bit of information, and you put in at least the basics, which are what date is it, where
106 are we. Which it has to be said isn't always easy to work out because they're not always very
107 good at actually recording that. I think ideally you've got a latitude and longitude. Quite often
108 you don't, quite often you just have, we have somewhere between you know, we're going from
109 Forsythe to Chatham, or Malta to [M—place name, inaudible 0:10:30] or you know, something
110 like that. Anyway you don't have much more than that. But some indication of where we are,
111 and then all the weather information. And that can be anything from, it's usually about--,
112 there's usually at least half a dozen sets of weather records for any days log. But there can
113 be up to 24, there can be one every hour. And all the weather really is compulsory, so it's
114 wind speed, it's wind direction, it's the pressure, it's air temperature, water temperature, and
115 weather conditions normally. On the American ones sometimes there's cloud cover as well,
116 although I haven't had one yet that has that. And the logs sort of change a bit sometimes, so
117 they don't always come in exactly the right order that they are on the box that you have. So
118 you do have to sort of pay attention initially to make sure you're actually putting things in the
119 right boxes. And then you click on, I've finished, or you can go on to transcribe any comments
120 or, you know, things about particular weather conditions, things lost overboard, people who
121 are ill, crew coming or going, meeting other ships. Absolutely anything really. All of that kind
122 of stuff. And so you transcribe whatever you want of that and then you finish that page and
123 you go on to the next one. Does that all make sense?

124 Q: So there's part of this task that's structured, and then there's some more of it that's optional?

125 A: Yes that's right, yes.

126 Q: And do you generally tend to get involved in the optional part? Is that something that you
127 enjoy?

128 A: I have tended to. I mean not absolutely every bit of it, a lot of it is very routine and after a bit
129 you get to know which bits are going to happen most days, and I tend not to do all of that most
130 of the time. I tend to be looking for people, I pretty much always do any mentions of particular
131 named people. Meeting other ships 'cause I reckon that's probably interesting for naval
132 historians as to, you know, what ships were around where. Numbers on the sick list I've
133 normally recorded 'cause I reckon that might be of interest to somebody somewhere, and it
134 only takes a moment. And then I'll sometimes do things like what supplies have they been
135 getting onboard 'cause they record, you know, how many pounds of meat and vegetables, and

136 bread they've got, and sometimes other things as well. And refuelling, so coal and oil, and all
137 of that kind of stuff. And sometimes people being recorded that they've been reprimanded for
138 exceeding their wine bill, or insubordination to a senior officer, I usually record those bits
139 because I reckon they're interesting, you know. So yes I do tend to record a reasonable
140 amount of that. And then in the editing phase, which is a sort of separate, almost a separate
141 project, but I'm involved in that as well. So that's going back to the--,

142 Q: Yeah. I'll ask you about that in a minute if that's okay.

143 A: Okay. Yes fine.

144 Q: I just wanted to ask you, in terms of the transcribing what do you enjoy most about it?

145 A: Erm--,

146 Q: Either in terms of the process or the information.

147 A: Yeah. I think, I think I feel a satisfaction in recovering the weather information, and knowing
148 that's going to be useful. I mean it's not always wildly enjoyable, particularly when there's 24
149 on a page 'cause that is an awful lot of weather. I suppose the more interesting bit is to do
150 with sort of life on board and getting a sense of that, you know, and sort of people and events,
151 and you know, sometimes discovering that your ship has been involved in, you know in
152 something historic, you know which you didn't know about. And occasionally finding
153 something which has got some kind of link to my own life.

154 Like one of the ships I was on was involved in escorting the German Navy into the Firth of
155 Forth after it had surrendered at the end of the First World War. And I mean I was brought up
156 in Edinburgh and I had no idea that the German Navy had been, you know that that's where
157 they had first been brought at the end of the war. But through doing this particular ship I
158 discovered that.

159 Q: Yeah. And do you tend to follow up on any of that information? Do you go and research it a
160 bit more?

161 A: Oh yes.

162 Q: Yeah?

163 A: Yes, I'm a librarian, yes [laughs].

164 Q: Well yeah, I am too actually, so... [laughs].

165 A: Yes, yes. Yes, so yes, I mean not always when I was actually transcribing, although
166 sometimes I did. I mean partly sometimes just in terms of trying to work out what on earth is
167 going on here, if the writing was difficult it sometimes helped to you know, if I could find out
168 what might this ship have been involved in, and therefore what might these words be. But
169 particularly in the editing, yes I do follow stuff up.

170 Q: And do you do that online or do you ever go to the archive or anything like that?

171 A: It's mostly online, yeah. I mean I've got one or two books now as well, but yes it's pretty much
172 always online, yeah.

173 Q: And again, in terms of the transcribing, what are the main challenges and frustrations with it?

174 A: The writing.

175 Q: Right.

176 A: Yeah because it's all handwritten. Well, except I think a few, I think a few of the American, the
177 later American ones I think are actually typed, which of course makes it vastly easier, but
178 there aren't very many of them. On the whole it's handwritten. The handwriting varies
179 enormously, and so sometimes it's really nice, although quite often when it's really nice that
180 man doesn't seem to stay very long and he goes off somewhere else, and you get a new one
181 with terrible writing. And it can vary a lot even just on one page, you know. So you know you
182 can get half a dozen different handwritings on one page of a log sometimes.

183 So I think that's definitely one of the main frustrations is just trying to decipher what it is, and
184 trying to make sure, particularly with the weather records that you're as accurate as possible
185 because three people have to transcribe each page. And they way they decide what to use is
186 do they all match?

187 Q: Oh okay.

188 A: You know, if everything is different then that weather record basically isn't useable, it gets
189 thrown out because it's not accurate enough. So if it's difficult to tell you really are wanting to
190 you know, make a big effort to get it as accurate as you can, and hope that everybody else is
191 too.

192 Q: So when you're transcribing do you know who else is also working on that log?

193 A: You kind of--, to an extent yes, I mean not necessarily in that particular moment or whatever,
194 but there is, certainly the top sort of ten transcribers when you go to the sort of home page
195 where the ship are shown with the number of transcriptions. So I mean there may well be
196 other people working on it as well.

197 But yes, certainly at the moment because of the American end of it I think there are rather
198 fewer people transcribing. Yes, quite often you'll actually know who else is around, and in fact
199 some people are coordinating themselves from different parts of the world so that they're not
200 trying to transcribe at the same time, and sort of leap-frogging over each other, and missing
201 out pages. So yes, it's become quite an art at this stage. I mean initially on the first phases I
202 think there were far more people, and we were much less organised. And you quite possibly
203 didn't have much idea really, and everyone was just sort of piling in and doing it. It's definitely
204 got more organised as it's gone on.

205 Q: Right. And does that suit you, being organised?

206 A: Erm--,

207 Q: Are you that--, do you have that kind of nature?

208 A: Reasonably, yes. I don't think I'm as bothered as some people, some people that seems to
209 be really, really important. I think I'm more inclined just to sort of think okay, you know, I'm
210 doing what I'm doing and if I'm ending up you know, jumping over people then that's all right. I
211 mean the ship I'm transcribing at the moment I think I'm the only one regularly transcribing on
212 it, so I never miss a day quite frankly. I wouldn't mind missing the odd day [laughter], but it's
213 just whenever I come back I'm exactly where I left it. It's not one of the more interesting ships
214 it has to be said.

215 Q: Right, okay.

216 A: And er--,

217 Q: I mean, how do you--, on what basis do you choose which ships to transcribe?

218 A: This one really I just kind of landed on accidentally, I think I quite liked the picture of it to be
219 honest, which was not a scientific reason at all. And the writing didn't look too bad, and so I
220 kind of got on it, and now I feel sort of responsible really, particularly because of this very, very
221 long one, and nobody much seems terribly interested. I mean it's been done by one person
222 all the way through. He's done the full lot. I'm the second person going pretty much all the
223 way through, and then we're going to have to try and persuade somebody else to do the third,
224 or various people to come on and do, you know, and do a bit. So yeah, so I feel kind of
225 responsible in a sense.

226 The Royal Navy ones after a bit I got that there were certain parts of the world I quite liked,
227 and other parts of the world I was less keen on. And so if I'd finished one ship and was
228 looking for a new one I quite often thought, you know, I'd like another one that you know, is for
229 example, in East Africa because I'd done one or two there, and I'd got to know the names of
230 places, and all that kind of stuff. I never got the hang of China at all. I tried one or two around
231 China and the names were absolutely terrible so I didn't. So yes, after a bit I tended to
232 specialise in parts of the world that I'd been in before, so East Africa, Northern [place name,
233 inaudible 0:08:33] and the Gulf I think I tended to do quite a lot of at that stage.

234 Q: Great. So can you tell me something about the editing then? How did you get started on that
235 and what does that involve?

236 A: Well, I mean it really grew out of, I mean it's not really part of the sort of Zooniverse part of the
237 project, it really came through Naval History Net, which is a website on naval history, as it
238 sounded. And I think the person who ran that realised that these logs were going to be
239 absolutely sort of gold dust for him and his readers. And obviously, managed to arrange that
240 as the logs got finished he got access to them, and put online the, not the weather records,
241 but all the rest of the information. So where they were on any given day, and what was going
242 on. So they were initially put on just in their unedited state so there could be well, a lot of
243 mistakes, question marks, and repetition of things, because three people might well have
244 done them. And gradually some of us are working through and actually editing all of those.

245 And so that's, only one person does that you know, you have a ship which you are editing, so
246 you get sent the file and you work away at reducing all the duplication, and trying to fill in the
247 gaps, making sure that it's actually accurate. Sometimes adding in extra things which nobody
248 transcribed in the first place because you know, they were maybe just concentrating on the
249 weather, and maybe no one was really transcribing the other remarks at all. So that almost--,
250 it's trying to make a good story out of it in some ways.

251 Q: So--,

252 A: And certainly--, sorry.

253 Q: No, I was going to say, so again, are there various elements of that you particularly enjoy or
254 find frustrating?

255 A: I think I--, well again, the writing is definitely one of the things. I mean I do tend to look--, so
256 far I've mostly edited ships which I'd also transcribed, and so I knew I was probably going to
257 have a reasonable chance of managing the writing. I'm now rather running out of those, and
258 the one I'm doing at the moment is one that I didn't particularly transcribe on. But I do tend to
259 have a look at a few pages before taking one on, and seeing does this look manageable. I
260 mean I enjoy sort of getting a sense of the story, and doing some of the research around, you
261 know, what's the background to the story. Because the logs are usually quite laconic, they
262 often don't actually tell you all that much, and so you just get a hint of something, and then go
263 off and try and explore and find out you know, is there some more information somewhere,
264 and then you can put in a link to that. You know. Trying to check out names of people, so
265 looking up naval lists and you know seeing, you know is this actually a person's name, or you
266 know when it's been spelt five different ways in three pages sort of thing. Trying to work out
267 who they're actually talking about. Yes all of that kind of stuff I really enjoy that erm, that sort
268 of exploring further I suppose, you know, and trying to put together more of a story, and
269 making it you know, interesting for anyone who comes along and looks at it. You know that's
270 fascinating.

271 Q: So how does the editing, for you how does it compare with the transcribing? Do you have a
272 preference for one or the other?

273 A: Erm, I suppose at the moment I probably find the editing more satisfying. But I feel the
274 transcribing is more the point of the whole thing. As I said, when I wasn't transcribing I did feel
275 a bit guilty. So at the moment I'm doing both, and I tend to alternate, you know I'll do a day or
276 two of transcribing and then a day or two of editing, and so on. And that feels like a
277 reasonable balance. The transcribing probably takes less thought because it's just, you know,
278 it's mostly just get the weather down and there isn't normally all that much else to transcribe
279 on the ship I'm on at the moment. They don't do anything terribly exciting mostly, apart from
280 people coming and going for which there is a list that I send, I send copies of any information
281 on that to someone who maintains that list. So that feels like a useful additional thing you
282 know, if anyone's perhaps looking for, you know, ancestors who they knew you know, were on

283 these ships. Hopefully we're actually developing quite a large database of names, and when
284 they signed on, when they left, anything particularly important that happened to them, you
285 know, what were they, you know what. So that feels like an additional bit of interesting
286 research that hopefully, is going to contribute to the world's knowledge. So yeah, I think I quite
287 enjoy having both on the go at once really.

288 At the moment I think I'd get a bit frustrated if I was just transcribing.

289 Q: Uh-huh. So I mean what keeps you motivated overall in what you do with the Old Weather
290 Project?

291 A: I mean I think the sense of contributing to something that I care about, but also definitely the
292 forum. The forum is massively important.

293 Q: Tell me something about that.

294 A: It's an extremely--, well it's a useful source of, you know, information, assistance, whatever.
295 But it's also a real community. I mean like, I mean I was just looking at it before you rang, you
296 know, having a look to see what had happened since yesterday, and in the chat thread
297 someone has just announced the birth of his first child, for example, one of the transcribers
298 [laughs]. And we have that quite a bit you know, people are you know, telling each other
299 about important things in their lives, or you know, that they're going off on holiday so they
300 won't be around for a bit, but they'll put some photographs up when they come back, and this
301 kind of thing. So it's got a real kind of community sense, as well as being a very useful source
302 of can anybody read this writing, does anybody know what's happening here. I mean I think
303 one of the very first things I ever posted was on this ship, and I was sure that the entry said
304 that it was towing a carpet, and I thought this cannot be right, but I can't make it look like
305 anything else. So with a bit of trepidation, I have to confess, decided it was time I got onto the
306 forum 'cause I thought someone's going to say how silly you are, you know, of course it's such
307 and such. But actually they didn't, they were very helpful, told me how to post a link to the
308 page so that, you know, someone else could look at it and whatever. And of course it was
309 towing a target, which now I would get straightaway because I know that's something which
310 they do very often. But at that point I think it was the first time I'd seen it and I had no idea.
311 And so it's a very, it's a very friendly place. And it doesn't assume that anyone ought to know
312 everything already. And I think everyone is very friendly to new people coming along, and
313 remembers you know, that it was all very baffling when we started, and you might have to ask
314 very basic questions, and that's absolutely fine. So yeah, I think as forums go it's really quite
315 unusual.

316 Q: That sounds very nice.

317 A: It is.

318 Q: So there's like a support element to it, but you also say there's a kind of--,

319 A: Absolutely.

320 Q: Kind of more personal interactions as well.

321 A: Yes. Oh absolutely, yes, yes. Yeah, yeah, there's really a lot of personal interaction, you
322 know, as well as the--, well and just some fun bits. I mean there are one or two ongoing
323 games for example, that have just been going on for ages, kind of word games and things,
324 you know.

325 Q: Do you get involved in those?

326 A: Yes, quite often. Yes, yes, yes I tend to have a look at those. I think it's improved my
327 anagram ability no end.

328 Q: [Laughs]. And have you met any of the volunteers personally? Do you know any of them?

329 A: No.

330 Q: It's just all online?

331 A: It's all online, yes. Yeah, it's all online, yes. But I mean I think some people have because I
332 think there have been one or two actual sort of organised meetings. And also I think
333 Zooniverse sometimes has a conference, and I think you know, a few people have gone along
334 to there and therefore met, you know, and therefore met one or two other people. But no, I
335 think it's quite unusual, it is pretty much, it is pretty much all online. I mean there's a facility to
336 send personal messages, so some of it isn't on the sort of open forum. You know, some
337 conversations kind of go off on to that from time to time as well. But yes, it's quite a
338 remarkable, I think it's quite a remarkable place, and I think it's probably quite a large part of
339 what keeps most of the hard core interested and whatever. You know because it's not just
340 you sitting at your computer in isolation transcribing away, you know it's also actually relating
341 to other people who are doing it. And assisting, you know, assisting them, being able to ask
342 for assistance. I mean particularly with editing, I usually sort of go through a reasonable
343 amount of the ship and then I start posting questions, you know, about odd things I haven't
344 been able to either read, or I think I can read it, but I've no idea what it means. You know,
345 does anyone know what's going on here, you know, I've been unable to find anything? And
346 quite often other people can come up with something. There are one or two people who are
347 absolutely brilliant at tracking down obscure ships, for example. And others who've got a really
348 good eye for odd handwriting. Or just people who happen to know that part of the world, for
349 example, and therefore you know, are more likely to be able to work out where are we, what is
350 this name, or whatever. So it kind of draws on everybody's skills I think.

351 Q: Yeah, sort of a group effort.

352 A: Yes very much so, yeah, yeah very much so. Yes, yeah.

353 Q: So all of this material that you're producing, these transcriptions, and editing pieces.

354 A: Yes.

355 Q: Do you use any of that yourself in any of your own projects outside of Old Weather? I'm
356 thinking about things like, you know, any online blogging, or talks, or history, or anything like
357 that?

358 A: I haven't so far. I do have someone who keeps challenging me to get Old Weather into my
359 next sermon.

360 Q: Ah! [laughs].

361 A: I haven't quite managed it yet. [Laughs]. I might manage it. At the moment I'm working on
362 one which is going to be on the eve of the beginning of the First World War, and we're being
363 encouraged to sort of include that somehow in what we're doing. So it just might be that I can
364 actually get something, you know, that I can get something into there.

365 Q: Yeah, that could be very interesting.

366 A: You know, which could be, you know just interesting because I've certainly got a lot more
367 respect, if you like, for the whole naval side of that which you know, I really didn't know about
368 at all. You know, because what we tend to know about is very much it's all the trenches and
369 the land war and so on, and the navy gets a bit, you know, a little bit unnoticed. But no, I
370 mean, you know, I mention it to people from time to time, and encourage them to maybe go
371 and have a look at it and so on, but I'm not really involved in anything else where I could
372 particularly use it. I mean I think it probably will fall to my imagination if you like, I think
373 particularly the editing, you know, just in terms of erm, having more of a sense of other
374 people's lives. And I don't know how that feeds into anything, you know, it's not sort of
375 formally, but I think it does feed into you know, into one's imagination, and a broader sense of
376 sort of sympathy, and whatever you know. I mean on one of the ships I was on it was coming
377 back--, it was after the First World War had ended and it was sort of coming back from Africa,
378 and the number on the sick list kept going up, and of course it was the influenza epidemic.
379 And I remember realising that I was really quite anxious about this ship and this crew. And I
380 was thinking this is silly, you know, this is all a very long time ago, whatever's happened's
381 happened. But I realised I was really getting quite anxious about my crew, and you know,
382 hoping that they were all going to, you know having come through the war that they were
383 actually going to come through the flu epidemic.

384 Q: Yeah. It's like a good novel or a TV drama isn't it?

385 A: Yes. Well yes. Yes absolutely, yes, yeah, yes.

386 Q: So you said you sometimes mention it to people outside. I mean, do you talk about you know,
387 your involvement with people you know, with friends and family? What do they think of it?

388 A: Oh yes, yes. They're a bit surprised by me doing it, although I think when I explain it they can
389 see more why it might interest me. Yes, you know, I think they sort of, I think they think it's,
390 you know, it sounds like a worthwhile project, and you know, sort of a good thing to be

391 involved in. But I can see them looking a little surprised [laughs]. Oh right, yes, not quite what
392 we'd imagine.

393 Q: Have you persuaded anyone else to join?

394 A: I don't think I have, no.

395 Q: No?

396 A: I think I've failed lamentably so far. I have tried, but nobody that I know of, I mean there might
397 be people to whom I've mentioned it who've then gone off and done it and who haven't told
398 me, but I don't think I've managed so far. Sadly.

399 Q: So what things do you tell them kind of what it involves, or do you tell them about the stories
400 that you find? What sort of things do you share?

401 A: I probably, probably the stories to start off with, and the sort of sense of you know, learning
402 more about other lives and so on. And then probably the science and why that's important.
403 You know, so that I mean I suppose trying to get two different lots of ways of interesting
404 people, you know, the people who might be interested more in the stories, and so on, or
405 people who might be interested more in the science. So yeah, I would probably tend to
406 mention both I think, and maybe start in a different place depending who I was talking to, and
407 which I thought might be most tempting to them.

408 Q: [Laughs]. Are you involved in any other citizen science projects? Any other transcribing or
409 anything like that?

410 A: No, I've occasionally flirted with other ones, but I've never really got into them, no, no. I mean
411 I did a bit on Snapshot Serengeti I did a little bit on, and I found that on one where you were
412 counting condors I think, and their prey, and so on. But I must admit I've only ever sort of
413 gone off occasionally if I've maybe had a particularly bad day on the transcribing, and thought
414 heavens, you know, this writing is impossible I really need a break from this, and thought I
415 might find something else. But actually I think the amount of energy required to get into a new
416 project is actually quite high. You don't realise how much you learn from doing one you've
417 been doing for a while until you go somewhere else, and realise it's all a lot slower really.

418 And I don't think any of the other forums match up to the Old Weather one at all. I may be
419 biased but erm--, but you know, they seem to be much more kind of functional, and quieter,
420 and just you know, not all that much going on. It may just be partly because I've been around
421 this one for a long time, so I tend to have a sense of who I'm talking to, and you know, know a
422 bit about them, and you know all of that. You know, so perhaps if I, you know, if I really got
423 into one of the other ones I might get the same feeling about that, but I think the Old Weather
424 one is quite unusual. It has very good moderators. You know, who do a lot of work in terms of
425 keeping it running. Well, and certainly in terms of the current phase, the American ships.
426 They got the forum sort of very well organised at the beginning because obviously, with the
427 Royal Navy it just kind--, with those two phases it just kind of grew, you know, in a pretty

428 unplanned kind of fashion, and although they did try their best to organise it as it went along it
429 was always a bit ramshackle, and there was stuff all over the place that you might possibly
430 find useful, or whatever. Whereas because they knew that you know, the new phase was
431 coming they actually set out a kind of structure straight away, so that you know, each ship has
432 a thread for discussion, and questions, and comments. And a thread for crew, and usually a
433 thread for something else as well. And one that explains about that particular ship and
434 peculiarities, and you know, sort of it tells people how to transcribe on that one in particular,
435 and so on. So it's much more organised this time round than it was before.

436 Q: Do you find that helps? And does it help, you know, other people?

437 A: Yes. Well, I think it makes it much easier. It still isn't always exactly easy to find, but it does
438 make it easier to think, you know, I need this bit of information where might I find it? You
439 know, like there are, you know, there's quite an organised system of geographical threads
440 now, you know, for different parts of the world that these ships are in. With people who are
441 responsible for keeping a list up to date, and so if you find places that aren't on it you can just
442 force them in, and they update the lists, you know. Therefore if you start a new ship in a part
443 of the world that you don't know there's probably a list of quite a lot of the names you're likely
444 to come across, and their locations already there. So yes, I think it all helps to make the
445 whole thing more streamlined and efficient, definitely yeah. Yes, definitely. I mean we do still
446 have some slightly funny ones, just about things we have misread, and that kind of stuff you
447 know, where people have said when I first looked at this I thought it said, you know, such and
448 such. Which people post just to amuse everybody else. Or interesting things lost overboard.
449 You know, there's always been a kind of lighter touch to the thread I think [laughs].

450 Q: Yes a bit of morale boosting.

451 A: Yes. That's right, yes.

452 Q: And yeah, fun.

453 A: Yes, yes, absolutely, yeah.

454 Q: Okay. I mean do you think you're going to continue with Old Weather for the future?

455 A: Yes I think I will. Yes I think I'm probably signed on for the duration really.

456 Q: Oh good.

457 A: You know, I think I've been doing it for getting on for four years now, you know, it is pretty
458 much part of my life. And it's an important part of my recreation, but also feeling, you know,
459 it's not just purely you know, passing the time if you like, you know it's not just like playing
460 endless games of patience or something. You know it's contributing something useful, but it's
461 also interesting and educational, and you know, kind of community building and, yes all sorts
462 of things. So yes, I think I am definitely hooked on it really. One of the other threads is signs
463 of Old Weather addiction [laughter].

464 Q: I'll have to have a look at that.

465 A: Yes, yes, I think you should really, yes. Yes that will give you--, I think we all reckon one of
466 the most dramatic ones was someone who was still transcribing as she went into labour.

467 Q: Oh gosh [laughter].

468 A: We reckoned that's got to take--,

469 Q: That's dedication [laughs].

470 A: That's going to take some beating, yes, yes.

471 Q: So I mean, I think we've touched upon this at little points during our conversation, and I've just
472 got one last big question, why do you think Old Weather is really important? What contribution
473 does it make in different areas?

474 A: I mean I think the climate thing I think is the most important, you know, because I think the
475 whole thing about, you know the climate is undoubtedly changing, and finding out why and
476 how, and therefore what we might be able to do about it, you know, is for me a very important
477 scientific endeavour. And all this information is there, but won't be got at unless we get in
478 there and you know, and extract it. And certainly phase three, the American logs were chosen
479 specifically to provide weather records for, particularly for the Arctic, and that sort of part
480 where they didn't have many records you know. So they kind of looked for where they were
481 lacking, and found ships that would provide that, so it's very targeted. You know, on what the
482 scientists actually reckon they need. I mean I think actually, I mean another, this is slightly
483 backtracking, but another good thing about this whole project is the way that the scientists
484 who are involved with it are very much around. You know, they appear on the forum as well,
485 and they can be asked things, and they answer. And they take a view on things, and you
486 know, and they do presentations. And when they do, you know, if there's some link to it or
487 whatever, they'll post that on the forum so that we can go and have a look and see what they
488 were saying. So there is a real sense of partnership I think of them really valuing what we do.
489 And seeing us in many ways you know, as quite expert in fact on the logs.

490 You know, I mean we're all told you know, if you really can't read it guess extravagantly
491 because actually, you probably know better than anybody else what it's likely to be if you've
492 been transcribing for a while. So yes, so I think the scientific value I would put first, but then
493 definitely the historical information, which is also being recovered, you know, in terms of the
494 other comments in the logs. And I think particularly stuff about people, you know, I mean we
495 fairly regularly get people posting on the forum saying, you know, I am researching my family
496 tree and you know, I know that my grandfather, or my great uncle, or whatever was on this
497 ship, you know, is there any, you know is there any record of him? And we're able to point
498 them, you know, perhaps to the logs or to say, you know, they're not up yet, but they should
499 be, you know, check back, this sort of thing. So you know I think it's helping to recover some
500 history that isn't going to get known about otherwise. And actually, sort of sometimes
501 correcting information, you know, which you know, has been slightly wrong, you know like, I
502 mean deaths in particular 'cause we start recording all, you know, all the deaths of anybody.

503 Now the majority of them were already recorded, but sometimes the information we had from
504 the log was actually a big different in terms of cause of death, or the date, or whatever. And
505 also we've sometimes had recordings of deaths of people who were part of the crew, but
506 weren't actually naval personnel, so [inaudible 0:31:31] boys who were sort of local, in Africa
507 particularly, you know sort of locals who were taken on board, and they tended not to get
508 recorded actually, particularly. But there were a few where it was actually recorded, you know
509 a death, and so we've made sure that they get kept. So there's a bit of sort of almost recovery
510 of lost history in some ways.

511 Q: Hmm. Oh it's fascinating.

512 A: Yeah, which you know, which also feels important to me, and kind of honouring people, in a
513 sense. You know, particularly in the people sense of it, that honouring people who you know,
514 perhaps died in pursuit of this and maybe haven't been recorded at all, or you know, haven't
515 been recorded, you know, we can add a bit of detail perhaps, you know, particularly if they
516 were buried at sea we might be able to actually have the, we might have the location for
517 example, because they did quite often put in, you know, the latitude and longitude when they
518 buried somebody at sea.

519 Q: Oh right.

520 A: And that, you know--, a few people have said, you know, is important to them to know that
521 about someone who's perhaps you know, an ancestor of theirs or whatever.

522 Q: Yes of course, yeah.

523 A: You know that it isn't just, you know, buried at sea somewhere unknown, but they actually
524 have some idea where it was. So yeah, so that side of it, you know definitely, you know I think
525 is important as well. And it's been a bit of a surprise, I wasn't expecting that bit, you know, I
526 thought I was just doing it for the weather and then the other parts all sort of come along, you
527 know, come along in the wake really.

528 Q: Yeah. And just one very last, very general question. So are you one of those British people
529 that's terribly interested in the weather? [Laughter].

530 A: I've got more interested in the weather I have to say. Yes, I've definitely got a bit more
531 interested I think, since doing this. I would say I'm probably a sort of fairly average, averagely
532 British person interested in the weather. I wouldn't say I was manic about it. But yes,
533 averagely. But yes, I've certainly got more interested definitely. Yes. Yeah, just in terms of
534 noticing it and being aware of different cloud formations, and you know, pressures. I look at
535 the forecasts with a bit more detail now, and I have a bit more idea of what it might mean
536 sometimes because of watching it on the logs, and seeing you know, what happens when the
537 pressure's falling faster, that sort of stuff you know, so yeah.

538 Q: So you've learnt some science along the way.

539 A: I think I've learnt a bit of science along the way, yes. Not, I wouldn't say, I'm no great expert,
540 and quite often I'm somewhat baffled by some of the more scientific debates going on. But
541 yes, I think I have got a bit more idea of how the weather operates definitely, yeah. I think you
542 couldn't not really.

543 Q: But you've not become inclined to go out and log the weather yourself?

544 A: No not, no not really. No. I mean I know some people do.

545 Q: Hmm, that's what I--,

546 A: You know, I think it requires equipment and stuff, which I couldn't really afford.

547 Q: Yes it does, yeah, yeah.

548 A: I mean one of the whole things of this is that you know, it's actually free. So it's, you know, it's
549 something you can do without it actually costing you anything, or having to go anywhere in
550 particular, or be around on a particular evening of the week to go to something. You know,
551 you do it when you can, and well, and actually wherever you are. I mean I have transcribed
552 sitting in San Francisco and South Korea in the last few years, when I've been travelling to
553 there, take your laptop and you can carry on anywhere. You know, so you need never stop.

554 Q: That's great. Okay. We've covered quite a lot of ground there, and that's really great, it's
555 been a fascinating conversation so thank you.

556 A: Good.

557 Q: Is there anything else that you feel I should know about the Old Weather?

558 A: Ooh. No I can't think of anything else.

559 Q: No?

560 A: No, I think it is, yeah, you know it's the weather, it's the history, and it's the forum I think for me
561 are the sort of, you know, the three key important things that have sort of kept me interested in
562 it really, and kept me going at it and yeah, and that I think just make it a very worthwhile
563 project, you know. And I think all of us who are really into it hope it's going to go on pretty
564 much forever. I mean this new child who's just arrived the father is saying, you know, expect
565 they're going to be signed up for sort of phase 21 or something like this, you know, they're
566 going to be, [laughter].

567 Q: It would make a nice university project wouldn't it?

568 A: Yes, yes, absolutely, yes, yes.

569 Q: Okay, well that's fantastic, thank you ever so much.

570 [END OF RECORDING]